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Beyond Equality: A Reply to Rakos

Lawrence E. Fraley
West Virginia University

Professor Rakos and I both prefer a self-sustaining and humane culture that works to the benefit of the individuals who live in it. We apparently differ on how best to develop the cohesive practices that define such a culture. B. F. Skinner wrote *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971) to explain that we can construct a humane culture without reliance on conceptual fictions like *freedom* and *dignity*. The argument is that we do not have to accept or construct such misinterpretations to build and maintain a culture that is capable of affording its members the kind of worthwhile existence to which we aspire.

Skinner pointed to the multiplying difficulties that follow when our cultural practices are based on such fictitious concepts. He argued that we can and should move beyond the simple rules that those fictions putatively support, because actions that comport strictly to the underlying fictions are often detrimental or inhumane. Blind rule following in respect of fictitious concepts, pursued as a strategy for cultural integrity, can be replaced with behavior analyses of the situations to which such concepts as freedom or dignity have seemed relevant. We can then construct a humane culture with more precision and with gains, not sacrifices, in the kinds of outcomes that the rules respecting those mistaken concepts were supposed to insure. It is important to note that we can also avoid the frequent miscarries that attend myopic adherence to simplistic and ill-considered rules.

Address correspondence concerning this article to the author at Department of Advanced Educational Studies, West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia 26506-6122 (E-mail: lfraley2@wvu.edu).

I have simply extended that list of fictions to include *equality* and made a similar argument. I am less apprehensive than some of my colleagues about transcending the security of fiction-based rules. Our discipline represents the philosophy and science with which to pursue the implications of our basic principles to new definitions and subsequently to a cultural integrity based more on a scientific analysis of the behaviors with which the cultural fabric is woven and less on blind obedience to fiction-based prescriptions that, of necessity, are much too insensitively simplistic for the behavioral complexities of these times.

Although a behavioral discipline with which to do better has evolved, Rakos expressed special concern about the perceptions of a public that, since antiquity, has accepted fictions about behavior and has prescribed rules of conduct based on those fictions. When the emergent ideas of early physical scientists offended the public, those scholars were cautioned not to pursue implications of their basic principles that would offend to the point of retaliation. Some, like Galileo, who did not heed that advice were persecuted relentlessly. Because a few bore the cost of pressing ahead, our universities now have physics departments, but with very rare exception, our universities do not yet have departments devoted exclusively to a natural science of behavior.

I cannot accept that the humane aspects of our culture can be maintained only by uncritical rule following supported by carefully fabricated concepts like intrinsic worth. The pretense that any two people are of equal worth, by any measure of real variables, cannot

be sustained by evidence, and it defies logic. Calling the putative equality "intrinsic" does little to enhance its credibility.

Nevertheless, we can self-deceptively insist that, in some abstract way, a quality called *intrinsic* worth exists and that all members of the human species are equally endowed with it. Our putatively equal intrinsic compliments of that ethereal quality can then be cited as the basis for our equality before the law, for each of us being entitled to protection during vulnerable stages of our life spans, and for each of us having the right to vote, the right to our day in court, or the right to speak freely. Constructing that kind of basis for our cultural practices is certainly less taxing than the more intellectual alternatives. Once we have asserted that the quality of intrinsic worth exists as an automatic endowment of our species membership, and that we all possess an equal measure of it, the stage is then set to promulgate a general rule that we must all be treated equally on the basis of our equal intrinsic worthiness.

However, we do not, nor should not, have to rely on that kind of contrived self-deception as the basis of worthwhile cultural practices, practices that should either be rationalized on their own merits or changed until they can be. Consider that we all find pain and suffering aversive. We do not like to see a person suffer, nor, for that matter, to see any organism suffer. It has occurred to most of us that pain and suffering, if allowed to occur to others, will probably be allowed to occur to us. On this simple basis, most of us are prepared to endorse and engage in cultural practices that minimize the pain and suffering of individuals. We may further bolster our support of such humane practices through a culturally promoted program of conditioning through which we gain the capacity to be reinforced directly by evidence that our behavior has reduced the pain and suffering of other people. We prefer to live in such a culture, and, obviously, that need not be explained in terms of some forced and unrealistic abstraction about equality in the worth of persons. That approach, among its hazards, implicitly excuses inflicting pain and suffering on nonhuman organisms.

Let us consider the practices that protect and prolong the life of a neighbor's brain-dead nonverbal child. It is neither helpful nor necessary that we drum up a pretense of universal equality among people. Instead, let us ask ourselves why we might endorse and promote such cultural practices, and then answer that question. That child does not meet the behavioral definition of a person, so it has no worth as such. If there were no additional considerations, wasteful practices to maintain its body-life could not be justified. But suppose its parents and relatives have become emotionally attached to what is left of that child and give evidence that its loss would bring them emotional anguish. We therefore may put their pain and suffering on one side of the scales and, on the other side, the costs of programs to protect and maintain that personless body. If we then expend the resources necessary to prevent the pain and suffering that such people would endure with the loss of a child in that condition, our contribution to the relevant cultural practices is explained without recourse to some fictitious abstraction.

But with this approach we are also free to take into account the anguish of the parents and relatives of another more promising child who will die for lack of an organ that could be harvested from the brain-dead child. We are free to examine the advantages to the culture of expending the one to save the other. We are also uninhibited in terminating a brain-dead body when that action is unopposed by caring others, an action that conserves resources and perhaps also makes available useful body parts. We are free to teach the proactive avoidance of misappropriated emotions. Those whose humanity rests on respect for the equal intrinsic worth of even a brain-dead body may have difficulty entertaining these more

flexible options, because such analyses threaten the conjured concept of sacred internal worthiness upon which their kind of cultural humanity is based.

Many fear that only conservatively prohibitive rules can protect us from the cultural degradation that they foresee when we abandon such simplistic devices and position ourselves on the slippery slopes of more intellectual resolutions. They pose scenarios with less extreme features than brain-dead bodies, but it is the human lot to live on those slippery slopes. We are already operating on those inclines, and we never leave them. Some who have devoted their lives to the intellectual development of self (as scholars) and perhaps of others (as teachers), tend to regard culture by simplistic rule following as an irresponsible default, especially when a rule leads to inappropriate action because it is based on a fictitious status like freedom, dignity, or equality.

There is more than one way to construct a humane culture, which implies that the different approaches are not equally worthwhile. The previous example suggested how a more intellectually bold approach to cultural practices can reduce real pain and suffering. It also avoids waste of resources and irrational miscarries that some would be compelled to tolerate only to bolster a self-deceptive conceptual device for the support of rules that they follow in less sensitive and more imprecise efforts to accomplish the same thing. Cultural cohesion by rule following will always be necessary to some extent, but mystical concepts and conjured forms of fake status support behavioral prescriptions that too often leave us inflexible and sometimes brutally inhumane.

Our discipline affords the philosophy and science to think more effectively about the events of concern. The emergence of the natural science of human behavior has made possible and feasible the abandonment of some rigid ill-based rules and has spawned new levels of analysis with which to formulate better ones. That analytical reconstruction of cultural practices is inhibited by the emotional baggage attached to the old approaches, even among some people who could engage in it. Such cultural fine-tunings are also opposed by those untrained in modern behavior science who therefore do not understand those efforts, fear the uncertain outcomes, and remain unprepared to participate.

REFERENCE

Skinner, B. F. (1971). *Beyond freedom and dignity.* New York: Vintage Books.